

Psalm 33-- I invite you to reflect on the praises, proclamations, and recognitions of God's sovereignty in Psalm 33 as you read my reflections on student ministry at FBC Athens for the year 2009.

April 1, 2010

It has been a challenging year. If we are honest with ourselves, I feel sure that each of us who invest our lives in the church family of First Baptist Church Athens, Georgia, are a bit fatigued as we wait for a new season in our church. I will let you fill in the blanks as to why you may be experiencing fatigue. Yet, as the cherry trees are blooming, the sun is finally warming us with its presence, and Holy week comes to a close, it is impossible to ignore the Hope that is rising in our midst.

I have spent a good bit of time in the first three months of 2010 reflecting on my experience in ministry here over the past year. My reflections remind me that 2009 was a year of phenomenal highs and cavernous lows; I am sure you can relate. As I sifted through the pain, the triumph, the frustration, the joy, the loss, and the love I experienced in my first year of ministry here, I realized how important it is that we reflect—together—on 2009. Our family of faith has a remarkable story and incalculable hope for the future. It is my hope that this reflection will add to our praises of, our thanks to, and hope in the Lord Jesus Christ as we embark on a new year and a new season in our church's ministry (Psalm 33: 20, 21).

Thanksgiving

I begin with thanksgivings of both a personal and professional nature. As David and I joined ourselves in covenant marriage in February of 2009, our church family celebrated along side us. Although I officially began work here only three months before our wedding, staff members, leaders and students from all areas of the church were there to throw showers, give gifts, and rejoice with us. In fact, over a year later, David and I have still not used all of our gift cards from the gift-card-shower given to us by the Youth Support Committee and the youth! This is only one example of how generously our church family loved-on us during our engagement and wedding season. Students, parents, church members and staff members made the long trek to Rome, Georgia on a cold Saturday night to affirm our marriage covenant and party with us at our reception. I will never forget dancing with some of the youth group members at my reception or waving to two of our college students as they walked up the hill to Frost Chapel in the moments before our ceremony began. Our first year of marriage was blessed with continued outpourings of love and support from church members who went the extra mile to look out for our needs and include us in their lives. We will always be grateful to God for ministering to us in 2009 through a loving church family.

Effective student ministry is 100% impossible without parental and congregational engagement and support. I can assure you that any student/children/music/educational/senior minister you talk to will tell you the same thing! As a very new (and somewhat accidental) student minister, my first year of vocational ministry was a positive experience thanks to a phenomenal group of adult congregation members who invest in student ministry. Sunday school teachers who are flexible, families who host events, volunteers who give up weeks of their summer vacation time to chaperone various trips, drivers, cooks, and suppliers—thank you for your help! This congregation cares about its young people and is ready to learn about more ways to demonstrate their interest in the emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being of its students. For this, I am so very thankful.

Student ministry in the congregation of FBC Athens has a history of and the potential to (100%) radically impact the lives of young people in our community because it is supported by adults who are willing to learn and grow!

Being a minister is not easy. Being a student minister is really not easy. First-year student ministry is downright tough. Yet, in each of my four capacities as a staff member with FBC Athens, my co-workers far exceeded my expectations as mentors and friends to me. I first worked as a “youth” summer intern in the summer of 2007. During that time Matt DuVall walked close beside me as a friend, allowed me to experiment with creative ideas in youth ministry, and daily affirmed my gifting for ministry. In 2008 I was asked to come back as an interim youth minister for the summer. In December of the same year, I returned to take an interim position working with youth and college/graduate students. In these “interim” times, Ron, Randy, Anne, Frank, Suzy, Donna, Cheri, Evelyn, Huey, Freddie, and Cicero have been patient with my inexperience, shared in my grief and joy, and helped me to improve in my job. Because of the daily encouragement I receive from my co-workers, I have been able to hear God’s calling toward vocational ministry and to receive sustenance from God as I journey into an unknown future (v. 18).

I am grateful to God for each member of this congregation and its staff who has ministered to me throughout this past year. I cannot quantify the importance of your encouragement, presence, and life-giving support!

Accomplishments

I mentioned earlier that our congregation has a rich heritage. When I say that, I mean that this congregation has a history of leadership, service, and awareness. It is important for us to be aware of and to cherish our legacy as we continue to discern our role in God’s story. In doing so, we understand more about who we are now and who we will be in the future. If I ponder all that happened in the past year, I see this strong

legacy continuing today. I observed action and potential for growth in the areas of leadership, service and community awareness in our youth and college/graduate students. I am proud to share some of the ways our students blessed our community, developed as disciples, and grew together as a community.

I am privileged to minister amongst people who desire to redeem, bring peace to, and provide opportunity within their community. Here are a few ways our students demonstrated care for others in 2009: they painted houses, visited the elderly, and cleaned up yards around Athens during March Mission Madness (and the great flood) of 2009; they participated at three sites during Operation Inasmuch (April 09'); they repainted three rooms in the Interfaith Hospitality Network of Athens Day Center (July 09'); they spent almost one week serving at various community improvement sites during Passport Choices (July 09'); they served for two days at the Athens Area Emergency Food Bank (July 09'); they raised \$100 for their Passport Choices mission offering for summer 2010 (August 09'); and they hosted a Christmas cookie-decorating and caroling party at Talmadge Terrace (December 09'). These group-wide projects are in addition to the individual contributions students made to other mission activities going on in the church (i.e. IHNA volunteering) and to community projects through school and clubs.

Psalm 33 reminds us that “the word of the Lord is right and true”, that God “is faithful in all [God] does”, and that the purposes of God “stand firm forever” (vv. 4, 11). Throughout the past year, our ministry leaders led our students through explorations of these truths that are foundational to our faith. Immersion in discipleship training is pivotal in students’ lives. I celebrate the discipleship training opportunities this congregation extended to students in 2009.

Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night are times of the week that youth focus on discipleship. This year, we tried a few new things with youth Sunday school. We had a Sunday school teacher’s retreat during which we established a “curriculum template” to guide the subjects covered during the Sunday school hour (February 09'). Instead of rotating Sunday school classes, our Sunday school teachers worked with the same students all year enabling them to build deeper relationships with youth. On Sunday nights, the youth did a brief study of our culture and how we can be more aware of living in a way that honors God (specifically the ways we speak, act, think, and feel). We also went through a series called “What Are We Thinking?” which explored how we think about God and how our thoughts impact our actions. Wednesday nights included a short stint with a Companions in Christ study entitled *Way of the Pilgrim*, developing an understanding of our spiritual journeys so far in life, and other church-year-oriented activities. All of this in addition to two discipleship-focused trips we did in 2009 (Fall Retreat and Senior Q.U.E.S.T.). We explored quite a bit of material this year!

Our college/graduate students experienced a bit of transition this year as our volunteers shuffled around in their roles a bit. The students worked through a series on Christian

leadership (*Habitudes*) and a John Indermark book entitled *Neglected Voices: Stories from the Biblical Margins*. My favorite experience with these students this year was during their Christmas break when we did a Sabbath Retreat (December 09'). We spent two days and nights at Lake Hartwell practicing Sabbath through silence, meditation, journaling, and SLEEPING! I treasure this experience as it gave all of us an opportunity to breathe, rest, and practice intentional awareness of God's greatness (v. 8).

Community—an increasingly cliché word in our culture! It is difficult for us to practice authentic community because our lives are oriented around individualistic pursuits; this is a reality we must all face as we struggle to orient our lives around the purposes of God. Yet I celebrate the steps our students took to practice authentic community with one another this year. Coffee on Sunday and Wednesday nights, Six Flags, Ultimate Frisbee, circle dodge-ball, Movie Nights, paintball, horseback riding, Apples to Apples, and gluten-free chocolate chip cookies are all ways that we practiced community with each other this year. We laughed together, cried together, prayed together, discussed together, and played together in 2009. We experienced deep loss and restful joy together. In all of these acts of friendship, I believe we are taking steps toward the unity scripture encourages us to pursue. How thankful I am to God for this community!

Dreams

I celebrate all that has happened in the past year—both the difficult times and the times of joy! I am thankful to God for all we experienced together in 2009: learning, growth, prayer, rebuilding, refurbishing, and friendship. In the midst of remembering, I cannot help but dream. As I said earlier, this congregation has incalculable potential for many reasons (again, please fill in the blanks). My dreams for the future of student ministry at FBC Athens include a clearer sense of identity and goals and, as a result, more effective demonstrations of Christ's presence in our congregation, community and world. But that's the short version!

I also dream of developing myself personally and professionally. God has paved the way for me to begin seminary in August of 2010 by providing me with a stable job (i.e. a loving place to practice ministry), my financial needs (i.e. scholarships), and a community that supports my goals (i.e. a work place that gives me two days a week to attend school). I look forward to all the future holds for me and for my congregation as I journey through seminary.

Reflecting on 2009 and the new beginnings we are experiencing already in 2010, I see the words of Psalm 33 made real for our congregation. In the difficulties of the past ten years in our congregation and community, we have experienced God's presence and provision (vv. 18, 19). In the Spirit of Hope that rises among us, we remember that God is our help, our shield and our source of joy (vv. 20, 21). As we journey into the newness of Easter and the newness of a fresh season of ministry, may God's unfailing love rest upon us, even as we continue to put our faith in God (v. 22)!